

Why fix a system designed to destroy individual thought?

by John Taylor Gatto
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I want you to consider the frightening possibility that we are spending far too much money on schooling, not too little. I want you to consider that we have too many people employed in interfering with the way children grow up — and that all this money and all these people, all the time we take out of children's lives and away from their homes and families and neighborhoods and private explorations — gets in the way of education.

That seems radical, I know. Surely in modern technological society it is the quantity of schooling and the amount of money you spend on it that buys value. And yet last year in St. Louis, I heard a vice-president of IBM tell an audience of people assembled to redesign the process of teacher certification that in his opinion this country became computer-literate by self-teaching, not through any action of schools. He said 45 million people were comfortable with computers who had learned through dozens of non-systematic strategies, none of them very formal; if schools had pre-empted the right to teach computer use we would be in a horrible mess right now instead of leading the world in this literacy. Now think about Sweden, a beautiful, healthy, prosperous and up-to-date country with a spectacular reputation for quality in everything it produces. It makes sense to think their schools must have something to do with that.

Then what do you make of the fact that you can't go to school in Sweden until you are 7 years old? The reason the unsentimental Swedes have wiped out what would be first and seconds grades here is that they don't want to pay the large social bill that quickly comes due when boys and girls are ripped away from their best teachers at home too early.

It just isn't worth the price, say the Swedes, to provide jobs for teachers and therapists if the result is sick, incomplete kids who can't be put back together again very easily. The entire Swedish school sequence isn't 12 years, either — it's nine. Less schooling, not more. The direct savings of such a step in the US would be \$75-100 billion, a lot of unforced home mortgages, a lot of time freed up with which to seek an education.

Who was it that decided to force your attention onto Japan instead of Sweden? Japan with its long school year and state compulsion, instead of Sweden with its short school year, short school sequence, and free choice where your kid is schooled? Who decided you should know about Japan and not Hong Kong, an Asian neighbor with a short school year that outperforms Japan across the board in math and science? Whose interests are served by hiding that from you?

One of the principal reasons we got into the mess we're in is that we allowed schooling to become a very profitable monopoly, guaranteed its customers by the police power of the state. Systematic schooling attracts increased investment only when it does poorly, and since there are no penalties at all for such performance, the temptation not to do well is overwhelming. That's because school staffs, both line and management, are involved in a guild system; in that ancient form of association no single member is allowed to outperform any other member, is allowed to advertise or is allowed to introduce new technology or improvise without the advance consent of the guild. Violation of these precepts is severely sanctioned — as Marva Collins, Jaime Escalante and a large number of once-brilliant teachers found out.

The guild reality cannot be broken without returning primary decision-making to parents, letting them buy what they want to buy in schooling, and encouraging the entrepreneurial reality that existed until 1852. That is why I urge any business to think twice before entering a cooperative relationship with the schools we currently have. Cooperating with these places will only make them worse.

The structure of American schooling, 20th century style, began in 1806 when Napoleon's amateur soldiers beat the professional soldiers of Prussia at the battle of Jena. When your business is selling soldiers, losing a battle like that is serious. Almost immediately afterwards a German philosopher named Fichte delivered his famous "Address to the German Nation" which became one of the most influential documents in modern history. In effect he told the Prussian people that the party was over, that the nation would have to shape up through a new Utopian institution of forced schooling in which everyone would learn to take orders.

So the world got compulsion schooling at the end of a state bayonet for the first time in human history; modern forced schooling started in Prussia in 1819 with a clear vision of what centralized schools could deliver:

Obedient soldiers to the army; Obedient workers to the mines; Well subordinated civil servants to government; Well subordinated clerks to industry Citizens who thought alike about major issues.

Schools should create an artificial national consensus on matters that had been worked out in advance by leading German families and the head of institutions. Schools should create unity among all the German states, eventually unifying them into Greater Prussia.

Prussian industry boomed from the beginning. She was successful in warfare and her reputation in international affairs was very high. Twenty-six years after this form of schooling began, the King of Prussia was invited to North America to determine the boundary between the United States and Canada. Thirty-three years after that fateful invention of the central school institution, as the behest of Horace Mann and many other leading citizens, we borrowed the style of Prussian schooling as our own.

You need to know this because over the first 50 years of our school institution Prussian purpose — which was to create a form of state socialism — gradually forced out traditional American purpose, which in most minds was to prepare the individual to be self-reliant.

In Prussia the purpose of the Volksschule, which educated 92 percent of the children, was not intellectual development at all, but socialization in obedience and subordination. Thinking was left to the Real Schulen, in which 8 percent of the kids participated. But for the great mass, intellectual development was regarded with managerial horror, as something that caused armies to lose battles.

Prussia concocted a method based on complex fragmentations to ensure that its school products would fit the grand social design. Some of this method involved dividing whole ideas into school subjects, each further divisible, some of it involved short periods punctuated by a horn so that self-motivation in study would be muted by ceaseless interruptions.

There were many more techniques of training, but all were built around the premise that isolation from first-hand information, and fragmentation of the abstract information presented by teachers, would result in obedient and subordinate graduates, properly respectful of arbitrary orders. "Lesser" men would be unable to interfere with policy makers because, while they could still complain, they could not manage sustained or comprehensive thought. Well-schooled children cannot think critically, cannot argue effectively.

One of the most interesting by-products of Prussian schooling turned out to be the two most devastating

wars of modern history. Erich Maria Ramarque, in his classic "All Quiet on the Western Front" tells us that the First World War was caused by the tricks of schoolmasters, and the famous Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the Second World War was the inevitable product of good schooling.

It's important to underline that Bonhoeffer meant that literally, not metaphorically — schooling after the Prussian fashion removes the ability of the mind to think for itself. It teaches people to wait for a teacher to tell them what to do and if what they have done is good or bad. Prussian teaching paralyses the moral will as well as the intellect. It's true that sometimes well-schooled students sound smart, because they memorize many opinions of great thinkers, but they actually are badly damaged because their own ability to think is left rudimentary and undeveloped. We got from the United States to Prussia and back because a small number of very passionate ideological leaders visited Prussia in the first half of the 19th century, and fell in love with the order, obedience and efficiency of its system and relentlessly proselytized for a translation of Prussian vision onto these shores.

If Prussia's ultimate goal was the unification of Germany, our major goal, so these men thought, was the unification of hordes of immigrant Catholics into a national consensus based on a northern European cultural model. To do that children would have to be removed from their parents and from inappropriate cultural influence. In this fashion, compulsion schooling, a bad idea that had been around at least since Plato's "Republic", a bad idea that New England had tried to enforce in 1650 without any success, was finally rammed through the Massachusetts legislature in 1852. It was, of course, the famous "Know-Nothing" legislature that passed this law, a legislature that was the leading edge of a famous secret society which flourished at that time known as "The Order of the Star Spangled Banner," whose password was the simple sentence, "I know nothing" — hence the popular label attached to the secret society's political arm, "The American Party." Over the next 50 years state after state followed suit, ending schools of choice and ceding the field to a new government monopoly.

There was one powerful exception to this — the children who could afford to be privately educated. It's important to note that the underlying premise of Prussian schooling is that the government is the true parent of children — the State is sovereign over the family. At the most extreme pole of this notion is the idea that biological parents are really the enemies of their own children, not to be trusted. How did a Prussian system of dumbing children down take hold in American schools?

Thousands and thousands of young men from prominent American families journeyed to Prussia and other parts of Germany during the 19th century and brought home the Ph. D. degree to a nation in which such a credential was unknown. These men pre-empted the top positions in the academic world, in corporate research, and in government, to the point where opportunity was almost closed to those who had not studied in Germany, or who were not the direct disciples of a German PhD, as John Dewey was the disciple of G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins. Virtually every single one of the founders of American schooling had made the pilgrimage to Germany, and many of these men wrote widely circulated reports praising the Teutonic methods. Horace Mann's famous "7th Report" of 1844, still available in large libraries, was perhaps the most important of these.

By 1889, a little more than 100 years ago, the crop was ready for harvest. It that year the US Commissioner of Education, William Torrey Harris, assured a railroad magnate, Collis Huntington, that American schools were "scientifically designed" to prevent "over-education" from happening. The average American would be content with his humble role in life, said the commissioner, because he would not be tempted to think about any other role. My guess is that Harris meant he would not be able to think about any other role. In 1896 the famous John Dewey, then at the University of Chicago, said that independent,

self-reliant people were a counter-productive anachronism in the collective society of the future. In modern society, said Dewey, people would be defined by their associations — not by their own individual accomplishments.

It such a world people who read too well or too early are dangerous because they become privately empowered, they know too much, and know how to find out what they don't know by themselves, without consulting experts. Dewey said the great mistake of traditional pedagogy was to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of early schoolwork. He advocated that the phonics method of teaching reading be abandoned and replaced by the whole word method, not because the latter was more efficient (he admitted that it was less efficient) but because independent thinkers were produced by hard books, thinkers who cannot be socialized very easily. By socialization Dewey meant a program of social objectives administered by the best social thinkers in government.

This was a giant step on the road to state socialism, the form pioneered in Prussia, and it is a vision radically disconnected with the American past, its historic hopes and dreams. Dewey's former professor and close friend, G. Stanley Hall, said this at about the same time, "Reading should no longer be a fetish. Little attention should be paid to reading." Hall was one of the three men most responsible for building a gigantic administrative infrastructure over the classroom. How enormous that structure really became can only be understood by comparisons: New York State, for instance, employs more school administrators than all of the European Economic Community nations combined.

Once you think that the control of conduct is what schools are about, the word "reform" takes on a very particular meaning. It means making adjustments to the machine so that young subjects will not twist and turn so, while their minds and bodies are being scientifically controlled. Helping kids to use their minds better is beside the point. Bertrand Russell once observed that American schooling was among the most radical experiments in human history, that America was deliberately denying its children the tools of critical thinking. When you want to teach children to think, you begin by treating them seriously when they are little, giving them responsibilities, talking to them candidly, providing privacy and solitude for them, and making them readers and thinkers of significant thoughts from the beginning. That's if you want to teach them to think.

There is no evidence that this has been a State purpose since the start of compulsion schooling. When Frederick Froebel, the inventor of kindergarten in 19th century Germany, fashioned his idea he did not have a "garden for children" in mind, but a metaphor of teachers as gardeners and children as the vegetables. Kindergarten was created to be a way to break the influence of mothers on their children. I note with interest the growth of daycare in the US and the repeated urgings to extend school downward to include 4-year-olds.

The movement toward state socialism is not some historical curiosity but a powerful dynamic force in the world around us. It is fighting for its life against those forces which would, through vouchers or tax credits, deprive it of financial lifeblood, and it has countered this thrust with a demand for even more control over children's lives, and even more money to pay for the extended school day and year that this control requires.

A movement as visibly destructive to individuality, family and community as government-system schooling has been might be expected to collapse in the face of its dismal record, coupled with an increasingly aggressive shake down of the taxpayer, but this has not happened. The explanation is largely found in the transformation of schooling from a simple service to families and towns to an enormous, centralized corporate enterprise.

While this development has had a markedly adverse effect on people and on our democratic traditions, it

has made schooling the single largest employer in the United States, and the largest grantor of contracts next to the Defense Department. Both of these low-visibility phenomena provide monopoly schooling with powerful political friends, publicists, advocates and other useful allies. This is a large part of the explanation why no amount of failure ever changes things in schools, or changes them for very long. School people are in a position to outlast any storm and to keep short-attention-span public scrutiny thoroughly confused.

An overview of the short history of this institution reveals a pattern marked by intervals of public outrage, followed by enlargement of the monopoly in every case.

After nearly 30 years spent inside a number of public schools, some considered good, some bad, I feel certain that management cannot clean its own house. It relentlessly marginalizes all significant change.

There are no incentives for the "owners" of the structure to reform it, nor can there be without outside competition.

What is needed for several decades is the kind of wildly-swinging free market we had at the beginning of our national history. It cannot be overemphasized that no body of theory exists to accurately define the way children learn, or which learning is of most worth. By pretending the existence of such we have cut ourselves off from the information and innovation that only a real market can provide. Fortunately our national situation has been so favorable, so dominant through most of our history, that the margin of error afforded has been vast.

But the future is not so clear. Violence, narcotic addictions, divorce, alcoholism, loneliness...all these are but tangible measures of a poverty in education. Surely schools, as the institutions monopolizing the daytimes of childhood, can be called to account for this. In a democracy the final judges cannot be experts, but only the people.

Trust the people, give them choices, and the school nightmare will vanish in a generation.



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